RADIOHEAD

"It's taken us three years to realise that the feeling you get when you play a guitar with your mates is the only feeling that matters. Everything else just gets in the way"
Thom Yorke, March 1993

Ironically, if it wasn't for things "getting in the way" - a worldwide hit single; a 1.5 million selling debut album; the unending rigours of "promotion"; and critics all too eager to call you a one-hit-wonder - RADIOHEAD might never have made **"THE BENDS"**. Thrust from the relative anonymity of Oxford, England to the demands of corporate America, RADIOHEAD went through blazing rows, long silences, the pressure to follow up a success that they were beginning to feel increasingly removed from; and of course strange Americans walking up to Thom in the street and shouting, ***"Hey it's the "Creep" guy!"***. In the two year gap between **"PABLO HONEY"** and **"THE BENDS"**, a few things became clear: firstly, as Thom puts it, ***"that you have to possess the courage of your convictions, even when people keep shoving statistics in your face"; and secondly,*** there's no point in analysing the creative process: ***"It happens despite you, not because of you".***

Listening to **"THE BENDS"** (the name comes from a term describing what happens when you're underwater and you rise to the surface too quickly, thereby causing your lungs to cave in) it's hard to disagree when Thom talks about the music as an entity outside the band's control. As one critic put it, ***"I thought it was against the law for people in bands to be that nice".*** Spend any time in the company of guitarists Ed and Jonny, Colin (bass) and Phil (drums) and there's no indication that these three affable university graduates and one of their kid brothers had anything to do with the unholy planet of sound conjured behind Thom on **"THE BENDS"**. Radiohead breathe new life into the old cliche of rock music as catharsis. **"MY IRON LUNG"** shudders between twin layers of immense sadness and savage aggression, Thom castigating the lobotomised angst that pervades much of his generation; ***"We're too young to fall asleep/Too cynical to speak...suck, suck your teenage thumb/Toilet trained and dumb";*** **"PLANET TELEX"** is simply awesome, subsumed by a cavernous air of terror and dread. And **"BLACK STAR"** conjures dark, dark theatre from a waterfall of bleak emotions.

the bends

RADIOHEAD will probably be referred to as stadium rock, but that's only because there's no roof that can contain the sadness that **"THE BENDS"** harbours.

RADIOHEAD have already garnered rave reviews for **"THE BENDS"** that describe them as unrecognisable from the timid university graduates that made **"PABLO HONEY"**; but hell, the signs were there, way back in 1992's debut "Drill" EP, where a blueprint of sorts was established. Jonny and Ed treating Thom's choirboy vocals with the kind of merciful detachment that Jack Nicholson usually saves for locked bathroom doors. Of course, if you've ever seen Radiohead in concert, then you'll know all of this, the overwhelming wall of sound which vainly tries to keep out snatches of intense melody, the way Jonny bends over his guitar seemingly paralysed by each shot of noise.

And then, when the noise dies down, there's still the melancholia. That's the other stunning thing about **"THE BENDS"** the sense of hope buckling beneath the weight of everyday pain: **"(NICE DREAM)"** began life half-remembered in Thom's head in the middle of a drunken midnight blackout, and developed into achingly helpless nocturnal lullaby. Its Kurt Vonnegut inspired imagery evokes an emptiness almost too massive to bear; and **"BULLETPROOF.I WISH I WAS"** is simply what happens when you've been hurt once too often. **"THE BENDS"** ends with **"STREET SPIRIT (FADE OUT)"**. Tattered and torn, yet possessed of a unique calm common only to suicide notes and the recently exorcised, it's one of many songs on **"THE BENDS"** that's led critics to fancifully hazard potential suicide theories on Thom's concern, but point you in the direction of **"JUST"**, where he sings, ***"Don't get my sympathy/Hanging out on the fifteenth floor"*** - as clear an indication as any that he's sick of the salacious voyeurism which has made martyrs of Kurt Cobain and other public figures: ***"People go on heroin or cut themselves up in order to show that they mean it. I don't feel that I have to prove that I mean it".***

With a record as awesome as **"THE BENDS"** to his name, no-one expects him to.

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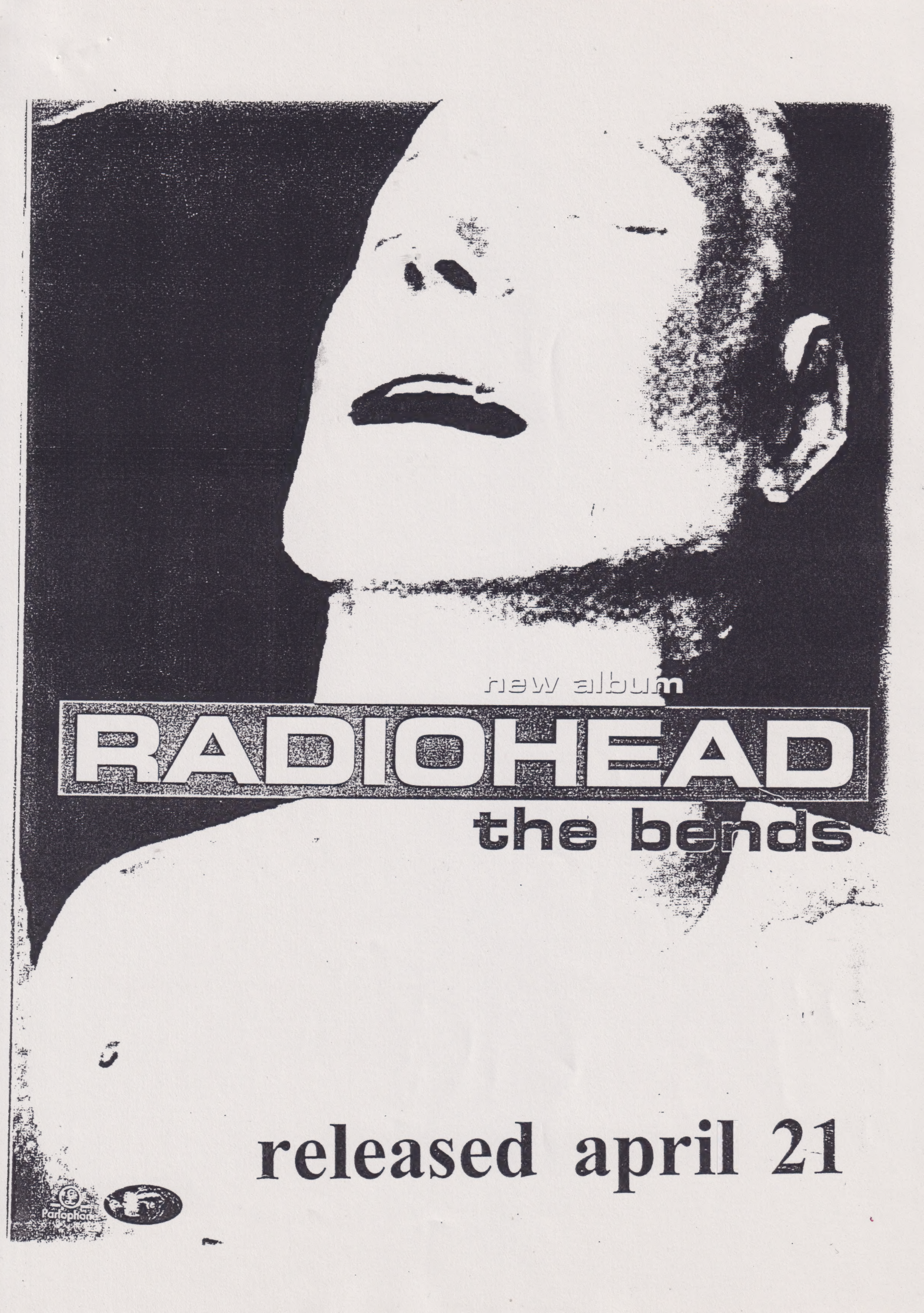
new album
RADIOHEAD
the bends
released april 21
Parlophone

Page 48: THE ORB, BRAINIAC *Page 49:* GENE, MOBY *Page 50:* SONIC YOUTH, MARTIN STEPHENSON

FAIRY TALE OF NEW YORKE

RADIOHEAD

The Bends *(Parlophone/All formats)*

LONG PLAY

Edited by JOHN ROBERTS

AS END of the millennium psychosis fills the air, so attempts to rewrite history become ever more blatant. You can see it in the proliferation of 'Director's Cuts' at the cinema. You can see it in the rash of warts-and-all autobiographies from politicians attempting to reconstruct the myth before someone else does it for them. And you can see it in this album's naked ambition.

See, since their fair-to-middling debut, Pablo Honey, Radiohead have clearly enlisted the services of Mystic Meg as some sort of spiritual advisor. And when they demanded to know how their entry in *The Complete History Of 20th Century Indie Rock* (published 2001) might read, Meg informed them that it simply said, "Nice blokes from Oxford. Had a hit with that 'Creep' song."

And Radiohead clearly resolved to make an album so stunning it would make people forget their own name, never mind that albatross-like 45. And, by George, I think they've done it.

Because there are really only two words for this album. The first is epic, because every song here is imbued with an incredible sense of grandeur. Where once Radiohead songs sneaked in through a back entrance, nearly all of 'The Bends' kicks down the front door, gets off with the best-looking girl in the room, leaps onto a table top and declares, with a mighty roar, "I am something very special indeed." And it has a point.

And, if that sounds in line with current accepted wisdom on the 'Head (that they are "the new U2", just in case this is the first magazine you've read in 12 months), well, it isn't supposed to. True, a couple of tracks – the vitriolic bluster of 'Just' and the lighters-aloft smooch of 'Bullet Proof... I Wish I Was' – are a mere inch away from stadium rock. But, as with the mere inch that nowadays separates Labour and Conservative policy, it's a vital inch: room enough for Radiohead to do things Bono wouldn't dare dream about.

Jonny Greenwood frequently turns the very concept of The Great Guitar Riff upside down and inside out. Thom Yorke's ghostly falsetto attains heights of emotion practically unheard of in this irony-infested age. Ugly swathes of feedback are thrown over pretty pop melodies and touching weepies are scabbed with the most caustic lyrics this side of The Holy Bible. Radiohead, in short, take risks and are therefore still a great deal more us than them. Good.

Make no mistake, 'The Bends' will be one of and quite possibly the indie rock albums of the year. With guitar emphasis on indie and rock. Which means that, despite the fact that its tone of bleak outsiderdom is aeons away from Blur's chirpy matelessness – actually, this year's 'Parklife'. As with Alba's finest hour, almost every track here is a potentially huge hit single, yet as a whole the album presents a coherent all-pervading worldview. And, as with 'Parklife', 'The Bends' should set an "unfashionable" band in a completely different light and catapult them to megastardom. The other word for this album, by the way, is classic.

But if 'Parklife' summed up mid-'90s Britain perfectly – and, let's face it, it did – then this is the consummate all-encompassing continent-straddling '90s rock record. 'Parklife' Plus One. If you like Radiohead are looking way, way beyond Brit awards and rehabilitating Fred Perry fashion. Listening to an unutterably gorgeous torch song like 'Fake Plastic Trees', a full-tilt angstfest like 'The Bends' or 'My Iron Lung' – a cross between the two – you can't help but think if this record doesn't attain the sort of success that makes Pearl Jam look like Ruptured Dog we might just as well give up and stay down the Bull & Gate forever.

True, Thom Yorke's lyrics ("*They're the ones who'll hate you when you think you've got the world all sussed out*" and "*When the power runs out, we'll just hum/This is our new song, just like the last one*" plus plenty more where they came from) suggest that his hitherto mild brush with global stardom has left him with nothing but antipathy for the tortured generation spokesman status that comes with the territory. But then the likes of 'Fake Plastic Trees' and 'Black Star' show he actually cares very little for much in this miserable little century, full stop. No matter. When those history books are written, the feeling will not be mutual.

Creep? Creep who? (9)

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ALBUMS OF THE MONTH

RADIOHEAD
The Bends
(Parlophone TPS7372)

This time last year, there was abject fear in the Radiohead camp. The band were in Micky Most's Rak studios in London, in the middle of a projected nine-week recording session. A European tour with James at the end of 1993 had more or less wound up the protracted touring in support of their debut album, *Pablo Honey*. May and June would see them sally forth one more time, in a final effort to wring some 'Creep'-led sales from the indie kids and post-modern rockers of the Far East, Australia and New Zealand. But sandwiched in the middle, they had to make the follow-up to the 1.1 million-selling, unexpected success of their debut. And Radiohead lost the plot.

They found themselves wallowing for four days on one song. The naivete and enthusiasm that had allowed them to rush through the making of *Pablo Honey* in three weeks was gone. Their confidence was shot to pieces. "It was too thought out, it lost a lot of spontaneity," remembers guitarist Ed O'Brien. Radiohead almost imploded. The sessions were a week behind schedule. Touring commitments loomed. Things were not looking good. Producer John Leckie, who'd already seen the heart of darkness with The Stone Roses, must have been thinking: 'Why me?'

So Radiohead abandoned ship, went back on the road and rediscovered their purpose. On stage Down Under, they were reminded of the energy and ferocity of their live incarnation. They came home, junked the Rak Sessions, went back to Oxford and recorded an album in two weeks. Out of the pressure came *The Bends*.

Despite—or, more likely, because of—the fraught circumstances of its genesis, *The Bends* is a remarkable achievement. Taut, fierce, scared and scary, it is the sound of humdrum rock lashed into brilliance by one man's howling turmoil and one band's grasp of light and shade. Out of context, last autumn's single 'My Iron Lung' appeared dull and plodding, a dense racket unleavened by the whipcracking zip of 'Anyone Can Play Guitar' or the brattish pop suss that made a world-beating legend of 'Creep'. But the fact that this, the track they chose as their back-from-the-brink single, was recorded live at The Astoria in London tells you something about the new Radiohead. No messing, no fussing, just playing to their strengths as a great live band.

Here in *The Bends*, 'My Iron Lung' comes alive, slotting perfectly into the album's slew of fucked-up and fucked-off tirades. The band claim much of the imagery stems from illness, from the catalogue of colds, bugs, exhaustion, stress and abuse they endured in their long months on the road. More specifically, Thom Yorke points the finger at the bubble he and the band found themselves inhabiting after going from zeroes to heroes in a few short months. *"Where do we go from here, the words are coming out all weird?"* he sings on the title track. *"Who are my real friends?"*

Of course, songs about the drag of touring the world, taking drugs, trashing top hotels and being adored by teenage Japanese pop fans are crushingly boring. Radiohead's strength is that they turn their downer on their world into something stridently uplifting. 'The Bends' packs a mighty crunch, its torrid guitars straining at the leash. 'Fake Plastic Trees', wherein Yorke appears to bemoan the superficiality of the world, finds depths in artifice. The irony-heavy 'Nice Dream', meanwhile, is perhaps the quintessential Radiohead song. Yorke sings like a little boy lost, the band strum and chorus quietly in the background, flashes of strings peer through the mix and the elegant whole is thrown into sudden chaos by the appearance of a starburst of guitar fireworks.

Here, and on 'Just' and 'Black Star', Radiohead spark and fizz and sound like they've listened to Queen's '70s titans. *A Good Day At The Races* and *A Night At The Opera*. Which, honestly, is a good thing. For the neatest example of the new assurance in the Radiohead camp, though, look to a pair of songs on side two. 'Bulletproof' proves that, if all else fails, Radiohead have a future writing AOR ballads it's OK to like for the American rock'n'soul gerontocracy. 'My Iron Lung' proves that Jonny Greenwood is a six-string alchemist of the rarest breed and that Radiohead are one of our rawest, realest rock contenders. And listening back to the makeweight cock-rockers that clogged up *Pablo Honey*, and thinking back to their difficult 1994, who'd have ever imagined that? **8**

Craig McLean

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VARIOUS ARTISTS
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The 'Head: Faustian pact with demonic deity in charge of stadium rock?

HARRY BORDEN

RADIOHEAD
The Bends
PARLOPHONE

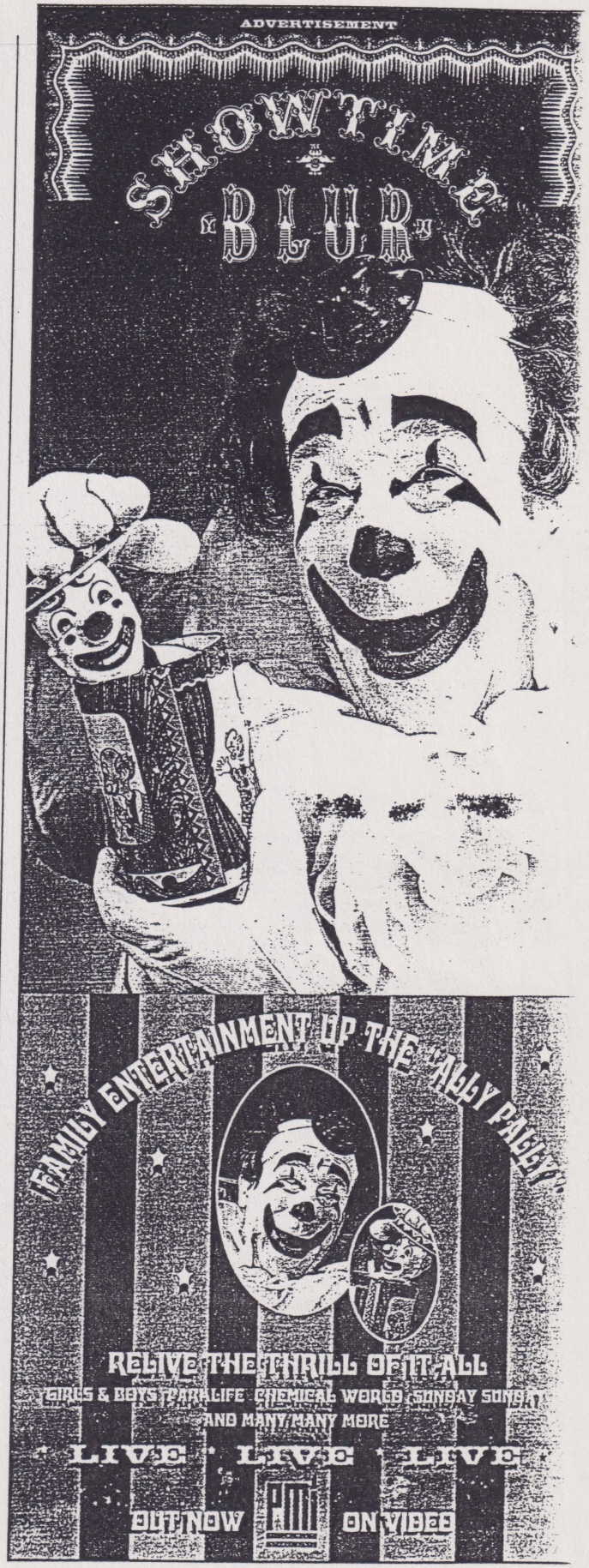
This is the media wisdom on phase two of Radiohead's career. They want to be the indie U2. They've tried to make 12 versions of 'Creep'. And 'Creep' was crap in the first place. OK, you lot, outside! Once a band becomes popular over the pond without first acquiring godlike hipness in this green and pleasant land, folk usually get suspicious. The lengthy gestation period that has finally produced 'The Bends' won't have helped, but surely tens of thousands of Americans can't be wrong. Well, they can, actually, but that's not the point.

Forget all that, and hipness be damned: 'The Bends' is set to be a monster album simply because it deserves to be. Fate is at this very moment flossing her dentures in readiness to smile upon them, without the band having undertaken any Faustian pacts with the demonic deity in charge of stadium rock. In fact, 'The Bends' captures and clarifies a much wider trawl of moods than 'Pablo Honey', as the familiar Radiohead cranked-up guitar pop is mixed in with a '60s English melancholia. Sounds like they've been listening to The Beatles, maybe even Nick Drake, in their spare time.

This sort of soundscape's ideal for Thom Yorke. He's got the perennial look of the down-at-heel trainee sex symbol waiting to make the grade, with maybe a touch of the bedroom poet who takes himself a bit too seriously. His lyrics here are full of decay and ennui – *"I wish it was the '60s/I wish I could be happy/I wish that something would happen"*, he gripes over the roaring guitars of the title track.

He's in fine voice throughout, sounding especially impressive on acoustic songs like the current double-A-side track 'High And Dry'. The exquisite melody, delivered with such choirboy purity, is whistleable enough to distract from disturbing lines like *"When your insides fall to pieces/You just sit there wishing you could still make love"*. The baroque 'Street Spirit' is another disarmingly vulnerable melody, intoned again with unforeseen fragility by the peroxide frontman.

Ultimately, though, Radiohead are still more exciting when they let rip, but if 'Creep' was set to be a millstone that problem is avoided with ease. The other half of 'High And Dry', 'Planet Telex', is in a more straightahead indie turbo-angst vein, but the presence of veteran producer John Leckie (Stone Roses, Ride, The Verve, er, Pink Floyd) adds new depth to the sound, distilling a potent blend of rawness and cool, and, on this track, a swirling near-psychedelic feel. Both 'Bones' and 'Just (Do it To Yourself)' could follow it into the charts – great songs with guitarist Jonny Greenwood adding an extra edge, stumbling onto some wayward routes often, it seems, completely by accident.

And if anyone actually wants 12 versions of 'Creep', they're advised to buy another eleven copies of that single from WH Smith's Golden Oldies department and go off and join the Vegetable Kingdom. Radiohead have moved on, and offer 12 examples of why they're one of the UK's big-league, big-rock assets. ■■■■□

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